



Town of Groton, Connecticut

45 Fort Hill Road
Groton, CT 06340-4394
Town Clerk (860)441-6640
Town Manager
(860)441-6630

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

Mayor Harry A. Watson, Councilors Heather Sherman Bond, Kathryn M. Brown-Tracy, Catherine Kolnaski, Deborah B. Monteiro, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Rita M. Schmidt, Paulann H. Sheets, and James L. Streeter

Monday, December 1, 2008

6:00 PM

Administration Building, Flanders Road

SPECIAL MEETING

1. CALL TO ORDER

Meeting convened at 6:00 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter

Members Absent: Councilor Bond, Councilor Brown-Tracy, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr. and Councilor Schmidt

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent, Director of Public Works Gary Schneider, and Rick Norris.

Board of Education: Washington, Zezulka, Gianacoplos, Peruzzotti, Volkmann, Doyle and Campbell.

Also present were Dr. James Mitchell, Wes Greenleaf, and Hugh Hunter.

3. NEW BUSINESS

2008-0012

Joint Meeting with Board of Education (2008 Standing Referral)

Discussed

Meeting began with Board of Education Chair Washington using the Board of Education's agenda.

Storage needs and William Seeley School. Washington said the Board of Education is running out of storage space. Mitchell expanded on that statement. Oefinger gave some history in that in the past year the Board of Education had asked for an evaluation of the wood building at Seeley and other spaces that could be suitable for storage. Schneider added that some potential spaces are in the political subdivisions whose zoning does not allow warehousing uses. Further, any such unused school building could require at least \$250,000 in advance to meet code compliance. For instance the room in which we are meeting does not have doors wide enough for pallets, and there is no sprinkler system. However, the Northeast School building is included in the contracted study.

As for sale potential, William Seeley's value is most clear because it is adjacent to commercial properties. Developers are interested even now, when immediate conditions may not favor any venture.

2009-10 Budget: Washington asked what the Town Council's desire is, as to the Board of Education's budget scope for the next fiscal year. Oefinger summarized recent talks with our legislators and said that the outlook required us to look at not only a zero dollar increase budget, but actual reductions as well. It as emphasized that starting out now with a firm dollar increase/decrease goal could turn out to be a waste of time when we do not know how serious the revenue problems might be. The three legislators said, however, that they foresee no harm to us in the current fiscal year, 2009. Monteiro said that the council is looking to make policy decisions,

not just make dollar delimitations, again due to the utter lack of certainty about revenues. As for revenues, Washington agreed that they cannot expect to avoid cuts below the current level in Educational Cost Sharing funding.

Campbell quoted a document from the State Board of Education and said it may be alarmist, but it looks toward a 10% reduction in state funds for education, so we are really looking for the Town Council's guidance. Zezulka said that such a 10% cut would amount to \$2,500,000 less in Educational Cost Sharing. He said they have taken some steps, albeit small, like combining school bus stops.

Watson mentioned that, even with a zero-increase or reduced budget, taxpayers are going to be affected by the third year of the revaluation phase-in. It will raise residential tax bills, even without any spending increase at all.

Monteiro said this is the first year when she has heard from people who are middle-income, who are desperate and fearful, for such reasons as that their retirement savings plan has tanked. Peruzzotti said that Binding Arbitration should be lifted, because we won't get real help from the unions. Zezulka said that our own employees are among those whom Monteiro mentioned, who see economic setbacks. He said that the Council's representative should be in all the Board of Education's budget sessions to see what we go through to come up with a tight budget. It was mentioned that Councilor Kolnaski attends sessions faithfully.

Washington said that the Board of Education assures the Council they will do everything they can to hold costs down. Washington said that grandstanding, especially about what was found in a dumpster, was not helpful and should be avoided from now on. Volkmann said we are going to need consolidation among the municipalities, like combining public works and police of the Town and the City. She cited a New York Times article (11/21/08 attached) on the economies of regionalization by a former mayor of East Hartford.

Sheets asked if the Board of Education has considered seeking givebacks from the employee collective bargaining contracts. Board of Education members said, not yet. Washington added that she could not see the unions giving back any money, and some charges like co-pays have increased steadily. Sheets said the last thing she wants to see is layoffs, because jobs are by far the better alternative to welfare. She said she went past Fitch High School at 11 p.m., and the building and parking were all lit up. Sheets said that across the street at the Town's complex, there was mostly appropriate darkness. Greenleaf said that people are there in the high school for one reason or another almost every night, whether workers or students and faculty, and the lights are set to go off at midnight, though they can remotely control that timing more precisely. Watson said we should look again at combining Town and Board of Education service work as well.

Mayor Watson recalled that we voted to curtail contractual pay and benefit increases around 1992, but that it deeply and lastingly hurt morale and productivity and caused lasting damage. Gianacoplos said she was not looking from the perspective of what decision would cause layoffs, but from what program can be cut. Kolnaski said that a layoff has a wide-reaching and very serious negative effect, and when we did get union concessions, they expected and demanded full make-ups in the next year. Washington said that the Board of Education was turned down once when they asked. Sheets said that at least one member of the Council has no objection to layoffs. Oefinger said that giveback requests are not appropriate until the legislative bodies have reached their ultimate bottom line of affordability, all other factors being known by that time. And even then, unions will demand assurances at the outset that there will be make-up funding at a certain future time.

Facilities updates: Greenleaf went over a long list of specific and varied problems, reading from

a notebook, while members had a typed list before them, including dishwashers in the science rooms, leaking windows, front doors at Fitch High School causing heat loss, burglar alarm zones aren't clearing, and lightning suppression needs to be fixed. He then turned to CIP related matters and said that Culinary Arts is one work station short, and there is still no electricity to light the Fitch High School roadside sign.

Mayor Watson Brought up the great distance he has to walk from a parking space to pick up his child for a doctor's appointment. There was much discussion of the parking arrangements, especially the inaccessibility of the bus staging area during school hours. Watson said that numerous people have told him about the inconvenience that they thought was unnecessary. Greenleaf firmly insisted that the present arrangement was the best, and no one could be allowed to put a car in the bus area, though they will try to provide a few spaces with access to the front door. Greenleaf added that the whole traffic environment is much safer than it was in the former high school layout.

Greenleaf then went into a list of issues at Northeast Academy. He said the CIP will cover some missing clocks [?!] He said some CIP projects that are being executed don't have enough money left to meet all needs. Special legislation, which is routine, will be needed in the coming session to authorize state reimbursement for changes that were not verbally explicit in original project approvals by the state.

Peruzzotti said that the Permanent School Building Committee and Rick Norris of Public Works need to be commended and congratulated for their tremendous job and great success with the largest project Groton has ever undertaken. He said that Rick Norris never failed to give a cheerful and thorough answer, even when Peruzzotti had a hundred questions for him.

Phase II: Oefinger gave a brief summary of where the Phase II Committee has reached. He said they just received a draft of the consultant's report, and they were looking toward a two middle school future. Sheets asked him which two schools they would be, and he replied that there are many combinations of locations and of new or existing buildings under consideration so far.

Discussion turned to the Town Council's agenda.

Liaison Committee: Kolnaski said they have failed to make a quorum lately, and Board of Education members have been missing. Mr. Campbell apologized for missing a meeting recently. Kolnaski said there are three members each from Town Council and Board of Education, plus one from the RTM and the City. She asked if the Liaison Committee could begin to meet on second Wednesdays instead the third, because the RTM is shifting from second to third Wednesdays. Watson said that Kolnaski should be considered as the Town Council's lead member on the Liaison Committee.

Merritt Field: Mayor Watson suggested the consideration of priorities of use that might be the reverse of those at Poquonnock Plains, where Parks/Recreation comes first, and then school sports. Peruzzotti said the high school needs more fields, and there is a lot of waste in time and fuel as well as liabilities involved with teams and individual students having to travel to distant locations regularly. Most or all of these fields need to be used jointly, because the kids are part of the town as much as they belong to the school. Mayor Watson said that, 25 years ago, Groton did not have such an apparent shortage of athletic and playing fields, because there was nothing like the present equality of attention to girls' sports. It is a very good thing that girls now have so many outlets and opportunities in every sport.

The need to use remote facilities for sports led to discussion of students driving with other students as passengers, which is subject to new and specific restrictions under state law. Mayor Watson said he was precisely aware of the laws; however, police cannot stop cars driven by youths for the

mere chance or suspicion that the driver's experience limit and age prevent them from carrying other students.

Returning to the uses of fields, Doyle said that fields should be open for totally intramural, pick-up and unorganized play as well, so individuals can get out and exercise when they are not the ones who are motivated and capable of team sports. She is on a wellness committee that has found this to be a very important factor for children whose needs have been overlooked, and the conclusions are supported by the LLHD member of the committee.

There was more discussion of parking at Fitch High School and the nearly empty buses leaving the high school. Hunter said that the buses have to be paid for on a per diem basis. He said that what determines our total need for buses is the walking distance policy and the elementary school students. The buses that make a nearly empty run from the high school return with a good load of the younger children later in the afternoon. Campbell said that maybe as a green policy, parking by underclassmen at the high school could be banned. He is against charging students for parking, however, as that is economically unfair and discriminatory.

4. ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Watson ruled the meeting adjourned by unanimous consent at 7:56 p.m.